

28 February 2008

Mr. Vladimir Spidla
Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities
European Commission
Rue de la Loi 200
1040 Brussels.

Dear Commissioner Spidla,

I am writing to you on behalf of ASTRA, the Central and Eastern European Women's Network for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights. ASTRA is an organization of 29 NGOs from throughout the region, including NGOs in both member states of the EU and in neighbouring countries that works to promote and advance sexual and reproductive health and rights at the regional and international level, including at the European Union. ASTRA would like to first thank you for your contribution to the public hearing on sexual and reproductive health and rights which was held by the FEMM Committee on 29 January 2008. Your support for sexual and reproductive health and rights issues in external and development policies is very much respected and indeed, as stated, critical to advancing gender equality.

The Commission's statement noted that the Communication, *A Roadmap for equality between women and men, 2006-2010* foresees the promotion of gender equality as a basic human right in external and development policies and that "improving sexual and reproductive health is strongly linked to the achievement of MDG 3 (gender equality and the empowerment of women)". While this is laudable and ASTRA very much supports your position on this, ASTRA members would like to raise the concern that while sexual and reproductive health is viewed as a gender equality issue in external and development aid policies, it is not viewed as such within the EU's borders. This double standard has led to continued marginalization and serious gaps regarding reproductive health and rights issues between EU Member States, which threatens women's health, lives and inhibits women from realizing gender equality as promoted by the EU, as presented in my statement at the hearing, which I am attaching to this letter.

ASTRA would like to highlight that the ICPD Programme of Action and the Beijing Platform for Action, as noted in your statement as one of the basis for the Commission's support for reproductive health issues in external and development policies, recognized reproductive rights as human rights and as gender equality issues and apply to *all* nations,

including those within the European Union and should be treated as such by the Commission. As the Commission starts discussions with representatives of Member States and stakeholders on approaches regarding sexual health, as noted in the Commission statement at the hearing, we urge your office to recognize these issues not only as a health issue subject to the subsidiary principle, but to recognize these issues as gender equality and human rights issues that fall within the mandate of the EU.

We look forward to your response to this letter and continuing cooperation on these matters.

**Respectfully yours,
Wanda Nowicka
Coordinator
ASTRA**

Attachment: Recent trends regarding Sexual and Reproductive Rights in Central and Eastern Europe with special focus on Poland, Wanda Nowicka